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A CONCORDANCE OF AMERICAN MYTHS.

THE wide distribution of many myths and types of myths in North America has long been recognized by folklorists, and comparisons of such have been made with considerable frequency. Although these have usually been quite limited, either regionally or in the types of myths considered, enough has been done to show that great additions would be made to the fund of human knowledge generally and an entirely new chapter opened in the field of folk-lore itself could some method be devised of bringing together all the similarities which even North American myths present into suitable categories. The accomplishment of such a work would involve the compilation of a concordance in which all the genuine, unaffected American myths should find a place, the time, place, and medium of their publication being carefully noted, and proper heads and subheads being introduced in order as nearly as possible to indicate mutual relationships.

This seems easy enough theoretically considered, but great difficulties present themselves to its practical working out. This is due not so much to the amount of material, extensive as that already is and hourly increasing, but (1) to the difficulty of classifying accurately and uniformly throughout, (2) to the difficulty of knowing where to draw the line in admitting myths and mythic elements, and (3) to the danger of making the work so cumbersome as to be practically useless.

On the north Pacific coast, for instance, we quite frequently have myths which relate how a boy was abandoned by his friends, acquired wealth, usually by supernatural means, and ultimately became a chief. Thus its object would seem similar to that of most of our own stories and novels, the interest, as with us, being augmented by enhancing the difficulties in the hero's pathway to success. Along with this common story motive several others may be combined. Such a story may be told, for instance, to account for the origin of some clan or family, or it may be used to explain the existence of a custom or belief, or again the hero may prove to be a supernatural being who is thus incarnated and passes a period accomplishing certain feats, somewhat after the order of the labors of Hercules, before assuming or reassuming his usual place in the cosmic scheme.

On the one hand, we should have difficulty in classifying a story of this kind under any single head, and on the other, stories identical in general plot might appear to have different objects and run danger of becoming widely separated in classification.

A more serious problem is presented in attempting to classify stories composed of many different episodes. It is well known that stories and episodes of all kinds may be borrowed by one tribe and affixed or in-

fixed in some well-known popular myth, such for instance as the north Pacific story of Raven. I have even recorded myths in which two or more utterly unrelated tales are attached on the basis of some entirely superficial resemblance, or simply because "they always used to tell them that way." For this reason I think that a concordance of myths should rather register the separate episodes which display structural unity than endeavor to treat all myths as wholes, though in these cases it should, of course, be noted that such episode constitutes only a part of the myth in question.

Were the divisions between part and part always as clear as in the cases I have had in mind, we should still experience but little difficulty; but unfortunately for the mechanical accuracy of our work such is not the case. We have myths and mythic episodes in all stages of absorption from that in which the parts are but clumsily juxtaposed to that in which we merely suspect a complex origin, and finally to one in which all traces of complexity have been effaced. But it is in the solution of such questions of myth composition that the importance of this very concordance lies.

The Tlingit Raven story, as given me by one informant, was made of enormous length by having the major portion of sacred or semi-sacred myths known to the people woven into it. Most of these independent elements could be separated easily, but in course of segregation I finally came to episodes whose independent or dependent origin could not be asserted with any positiveness without reference to the myths of neighboring peoples, when the source of some of them became clear.

A rude comparison might be instituted between myths and sentences or words, for just as we appear to have descriptive phrases adopted into general use, undergo attrition, become metamorphosed into verbs, adverbs, and connectives, and finally disappear as roots, so myths may be taken up into larger structures, lose their old forms, become reduced in length, and at last almost disappear. On the other hand, adopted elements may become elaborated or inextricably interwoven with others, but in any case there has been a historical, or rather prehistorical development, which it is of the utmost interest for folklorists to trace, and which, although it constitutes a difficulty in compiling a concordance, will probably be the occasion of one of the great uses of that very work.

Of at least equal importance with the cataloguing of myths and larger elements is the determination and recording of what in a previous paper I have called the "mythic formulæ." I mean by this those conventional modes of expression and conventional mythic ideas found in the stories of almost every tribe, and which are apt to change with a change in tribe. Thus, among the Haida a mythic town is described by saying that it was "a five-row town," while the neighboring Tlingit call it "a long town." Among the Haida, again, an incarnate deity

indicates his supernatural origin by clamoring for a copper bow and arrows, but his Tlingit counterpart is content to "hunt all the time." But I need not elaborate on this, for it is familiar to all. Such details might be too indefinite for insertion in the concordance, but the concordance would enable one to investigate them much more readily, and an investigation of this subject is most desirable.

That a concordance of myths of some kind is a crying need in the further study of folk-lore and anthropology generally I think no one who has handled myths to any extent will deny. The questions to be considered are: (1) is such an undertaking practicable; (2) how comprehensive can a concordance be made without destroying its usefulness, or in other words how much shall be included in it; and (3) granted its desirability, what steps can be taken by anthropologists and students of folk-lore to make it an actuality. These are matters which call for a careful and thorough consideration.

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